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PENSIONS AND WAGE INCREASES

A SUPPRESSED CHAPTER
FROM THE
HISTORY OF TROTSKISM
- HUGO OEHLER

REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS
LEAGUE
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PENSIONS & WAGE INCREASES

The trade union politicians of capitalism who dominate the unions gave up the fourth round of wage increases and settled for old age pensions. Here and there wage increases were rung from the bosses but the main trend was set by the Coal, Auto, Steel and Rubber Workers Unions. The question is--was it possible to obtain a new round of wage increases; or was the pension the only real concession that could be obtained? Under the methods used during and after the war by these labor bosses this is about all they could obtain because the exploiters were ready for a showdown. But under proper militant and class struggle tactics with strategy of nation wide help of all unions to those on strike real wage and other concessions could be obtained.

It is no accident that the Auto workers are disgusted with the Reuther-Ford settlement, with no real gains for the union and an increase of speed-up. The Pension Plan obtained was secondary while primary gains were forsaken. The militancy of the Hawaiian strike under Bridges; and a few plant strikes were the only strikes with leadership that fought hard for primary gains at the point of production for the employees. The industry wide strikes of the CIO and the Miners were only last resorts after every attempt at negotiations on their part failed and they gave all they could to the bosses demands. These leaders would have lost face altogether if they did less. But their settlement on the basis of a pension plan shows how far they are from capable trade union leaders. The AFL "International" unions under Green even did less to stem the tide of the bosses onslaught against the worker's conditions.

Let us analyse the present old age pension plans of the country and see where the union pension plans fit into this structure and see how it helps the workers.

The present Federal system of old age pensions covers about half of the workers and poor farmers. A little over half of the workers and poor farmers are left out of the system. These persons are left to shift for themselves if they live to 65 years. They either must get help from relatives or relief in one form or the other. In other words, they are in the main doomed to skid-row in each industrial city.

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Those workers who are covered now by the pension system get so little help that it don't do very much towards keeping body and "soul" together. We are informed that of those receiving pensions the average is about \$25.77 per month. Many get less than this amount and many more get the minimum of \$10.00 a month. A few get more, up to the \$85.00 maximum.

Even reactionaries agree that this amount is not sufficient. Many states were forced to carry their own plans to meet the inadequacy of the Federal System. Private Companies were also forced to help out with Pension Plans used for the few faithful who survived that long. These private plans were mainly aimed at the trade unions when they tried to organize the workers. Now the union leaders of capitalism put special emphasis on the employer pension plans for the workers of this or that given industry, and these leaders hail it as a big victory for labor.

The new pension plan before the House and Senate hopes to raise the minimum from ten to twenty five dollars per month, and hopes to cover about eleven million more workers, nonfarm self employed and state and local government employes, some domestic workers and a few others. The House plan still leaves out of the bill professional workers and farmers. So it can be seen that if this bill is not amended to death before it is passed in the next session it remains disgracefully inadequate.

If you add together all the pension plans; the Federal employees pension plans; the Federal Pension System, the Railroad pension system, the State Old Age Pensions; Private Plans which cover about five million workers, etc., they all add up to less than enough to take care of the aged workers.

On this basis it would seem as though the efforts of Lewis, Murray, Reuther and others is not only noble but hitting a real sore spot of human relations. However, a closer analysis on the basis of the worker's interests will give a picture of a different coloring.

Let us consider the problem of old age pensions from the standpoint of all the workers. It is agreed that old age pension plans are needed even though the majority of workers die before they reach the 65 year age limit to qualify. Naturally the limit should be lowered to AT LEAST 60 years. Industry throws many workers out long before this age and replaces them with 20 year olds with strong backs. The plan should be organized to benefit ALL workers and poor farmers and not just those who are better organized and can put forth greater pressure. This same condition holds true with unemployment and old age assistance. This in itself shows a glaring lack of every plan in existence. The propaganda for old age (and unemployment and other social needs) should START with a demand to take care of the lowest paid and unorganized workers first; even though the actual pressure of organized industries will obtain benefits first by their bargaining position.

Keep in mind that no matter how successful the union drive to get bigger and better old age plans is--the fact remains that it falls short in many respects. It is a gain for only those few workers of all industries who live to 65 years; and it will leave out in the cold the overwhelming number of workers and poor farmers outside of the basic industries and outside of the organized union workers.

It is understood that the workers must fight for all IMMEDIATE DEMANDS which are known as reforms. This obviously includes old age plans. But HOW you fight for reforms (Immediate Demands) and how this is coordinated with your aim and ultimate demands determine not only the success of the workers, but above all the capitalists plan to canalize these day to day struggles into safe class collaboration channels. That has become the net result of the Reuther, Lewis, Murray pension plan fight. These strikes have shifted the emphasis from the MAIN day to day fight at the point of production for immediate demands and wage increases to the auxiliary fight for immediate demands. It has the same effect on the general welfare of the workers as a whole as to shift the fight from the point of production to the point of consumption, prices, taxes, etc. We are not saying that these auxiliary, or secondary immediate demands should be ignored or forgotten. We are saying that the

fight must be kept in the sphere of the primary day to day demands with the auxiliary demands bringing up the rear. Even when the day to day struggle is hitting the bosses for primary issues the class struggle trade unionists still have the big and important problem of seeing that the labor agents of capitalism do not win in the strategy of divorcing these immediate demands from the class struggle ultimate demands and when the labor agents of capitalism not only shift the emphasis from the primary immediate demands to secondary immediate demands the fight of the class struggle element becomes even more difficult to make any gains for the working class.

It's an old trick of the labor agents of capitalism and the yellow journalists to claim that this or that step in class collaboration will greatly AID THE WORKERS; while theory first and facts later prove the contrary. Such fake arguments--that the more you produce the more you will receive in wages; while history and facts prove that under capitalist economic relations speed-up helps produce unemployment, depressions, and a relative lowering of the real wages of the workers. Also there are such fake arguments that the support of your capitalist in war will benefit the workers; while facts prove the contrary. So too with the union old age plans. They tell us this will help push the Federal government to improve their plans. But already the Manufacturers Association and Chamber of Commerce is pointing out that the government should not push through elaborate Social Welfare Plans because PRIVATE INDUSTRY is taking care of their own workers through these old age plans, and other industry welfare plans. This pressure of big business will result in lining up many votes in the House and Senate to emasculate the welfare Bills and to give less in needs to the workers and poor farmers. Whereas, the pension plan of the Military service of American imperialism helps keep in line a large section of elite military aristocracy who are organically tied with labor; so too will the old age plans of industry and unions help bribe the aristocracy of labor to use them against the many mere millions of unorganized poor paid workers. It will help along the American policy of labor aristocracy as was carried out by England and its trade union leaders many many years ago when British imperialism was still a world power.

Yes the workers must fight for all forms of social security, from birth to death coverage; but these must be subordinated to the main issue of wage increases and point of production problems coordinated properly to our worker's demands against the exploiters.

11-13-49

A SUPPRESSED CHAPTER FROM THE HISTORY OF TROTSKYISM-HUGO OEHLER

The truth must be told. No matter how much time passes on, sooner or later the truth about historical conditions are verified. In this case we are late, late by six years, due to conditions beyond our control, conditions we will not deal with now. We desire to present a factual account of a chapter in the history of Trotskyism, specifically Trotskyism in the United States, after the defeat of the second Chinese revolution, up through the victory of Hitler in Germany, through the Spanish Civil war and up to the beginning of the second imperialist war in 1939.

We know how German Social Democracy suppressed documents of Marx and Engels. But the truth finally came out. We know how Stalinism warped the writings of Lenin, suppresses the material of Trotsky and countless other revolutionists. These opportunists in the ranks of labor have borrowed a page from the historians of the exploiters and their political hacks who distort the news from day to day.

Now we have the Trotskyites, distorting facts, presenting a false picture of important historical developments. We refer to the book written by James P. Cannon, "The History Of American Trotskyism". This book was published in 1944 by the Pioneer Publishing Company.

Let us not misunderstand each other. We know that a dozen persons may observe the same situation, or accident, or event and when they are questioned you will obtain several different versions. We know that in factional fights each faction has its own point of view. Can it be that we are merely presenting a different factional point of view from Cannon and his Trotsky faction? Or can it be that underneath these factional views there is certain material which makes for objectivity, for class truth, for a better understanding of the events. As historical materialists we ask those who are interested in these class events to get all sides of the question, but judge by objectivity and not personal feelings.

The most important criticism of Cannons "History" is its subjective and personal account of events during that period. Trotsky often wrote from a personal angle, but Trotsky ALWAYS documents his material with a great variety of quotations, documentary material and other historical material which interweave the personal with the historical. Cannon fails to do this. Cannon gives his subjective version with little or no important documentary backbone. This method that Cannon uses is popular and makes for good reading but it falls short of being a fundamental work on the subject. In reality the burden of proof should be supplied by Cannon; but when one writes a book of that nature, the burden of proof to disprove his subjective statements thereby falls upon the shoulders of he who replies. Therefore, it will be necessary to give extensive quotations or parts of long documents.

I will inject much personal material. I will attempt to supplement this with sufficient documents to substantiate my position. I will not necessarily begin at the beginning, because I was not there at the beginning. But one who comes late may contribute something, and that I hope to do in a small way.

THE FIRST CONFERENCE

In the Spring of 1929 the first national conference of the Trotsky faction of the Communist Party was held in Chicago. This is as good a beginning as any point. I came to the conference but did not attend any sessions. I was taken to the house of one of the leading comrades. There I met with all the leaders in twos or threes at different hours and times until I had a good report of the conference and in turn gave them a good account of myself. I wanted to leave the party (CP) immediately, that is within a month or two after I would go back to my old District and try to line up whom I could. Cannon, Shactman, Spector, and all the other leaders did not agree. They said it would be of greater value if I stayed in the party. They had other plans for me. I explained to them that I had been removed as District Organizer in the West because I refused to sign a statement against Trotskyism. I had taken a weak position. I took a neutral position. I told them that I did not have the slightest idea what Trotsky stood for. I had no political documents of his and did not know what it was all about. When I heard both sides I would take a position. This was enough for the mechanical, bureaucratic Lovestone majority they rigged up at the District convention under Ben Gitlow's leadership. We had a legal majority but with Gitlow on the top committee overruling us most of our delegates were defeated and Gitlow gave his followers the majority. Under the circumstances it may not have been so weak; but in a factional fight nothing is worse than a neutral position. I paid for this, left for St. Louis, finally got a job and started asking for material.

I still came around to the party meetings in this area; but what experience I had sort of took the wind out of me. I finally obtained some of the fundamental material of the Trotskyises through Goldberg and Martin Payer of St. Louis. This opened my eyes and when the Chicago conference was held I quite my job and went to Chicago timing myself to be there for the conference. My cash was so low that I waited until Friday night to catch the bus. I needed my final pay check. This was a mistake. I should have gone there a week in advance so I could argue BEFORE the conference instead of being bottled up behind the conference.

Why do I relate this personal account? Because it throws light upon the way the Cannon, Shactman, Aborn faction worked. It must be remembered that I was a member of the Cannon faction in the CP when I was organizer of District 10. Usually the District organizer should have some avenue of communication to the top faction. I did until they were expelled and then I received no more communications. What I read were a few unimportant letters and secondary documents they had sent to Bushler, an old friend of Cannon's, and an excellent party comrade. But there were no political documents, positions, and that is what I wanted. Possibly the faction considered me unimportant until I came to Chicago on my own initiative. But the important question is this. If they handled a district organizer like this, how did they handle the other countless contacts they had throughout the country?

The truth is, they did a miserable job of pushing their case to the members, to the sympathizers and to the class in the inception period. This was a tremendous set-back for the left Opposition in America. They held the same fetishism of a party faction with party loyalty that Trotsky did in the USSR which cost him so much and which cut the ground

from under him.

Did they rectify any of this at Chicago? No. I was told to remain in the party and lay low. They would give me instructions later. I was told to carry out instructions. By this time Lovestone was held "prisoner" in Moscow and his faction was beat to a pulp while Browder was elevated overnight to power.

I carried out instructions. After a short stay in Chicago, doing not much of anything, except trying to make a living I was instructed to proceed to Gastonia and take up where Fred Beal left off due to his detention in jail for a frame-up murder charge. I carried out instructions, was isolated from advanced workers and did my revolutionary duty. In this whole time my communications with the Trotskyite faction were so meagre it could not be called an organizational relationship. It was a strong ideological relationship on my part. For what I saw and wrote about (which is already recorded in print) confirmed my convictions I was true, first of all to the working class, and carried out the interest of the working class 100% contrary to Stalinism and the weak Trotsky leaders.

If the Trotskyites handled other contacts in the CP as they handled me you can rightfully see that it is no wonder that they did not gain what was rightfully theirs. You had to fight your way into the closed circle of the Opposition; they were organizational sectarians.

So much for the organizational aspects of how they handled new recruits. More than once in the New York membership meeting and the PC I criticized them on this point. Now for the Chicago conference, which was more important.

In his book, Cannon passes off the Chicago conference as a big step forward. It was--in comparison to what they were--but there were many shortcomings that Cannon blurs over and ignores. Cannon forgets to tell you in his history that already at this first conference there were political fights over the line of march of the group. The left group in the Left Opposition in Chicago had such comrades as Tom O'Flaherty, John Edward, John Mehelic. There were many more, but since I did not attend the conference I cannot report details accurately. I do know that they wanted steps to be taken to speak to the class as well as the CP, the party. I do know they wanted the conference to go on record against building a labor party. I do know that they wanted some documents adopted on the Negro question and other pressing documents. But Cannon Shachtman and the dominant group just left this ride. They did not want to vote for or against. They wanted the door left open for developments, so they could properly trail developing class events, as they have done ever since. I put myself on record with this left wing. That was my mistake. I had stated my position and they just let me sit on ice until a future date.

This inception fight, which Cannon, Shachtman, and others were able to push aside grew like a mountain in the League until the days of negotiation with Muste and others where it broke out in the open. In all those years Cannon and others were able to smother this left development until Basky, Stamm, Gordonio, Oehler, and others organized a left wing and were able to smash through their bureaucratic control. Let us recapitulate this point from the standpoint of theory. From the very

inception of the Communist League the leadership did not understand one important problem of the class struggle. Let us put it this way. If you are a faction of the party, within the party with a legal status and have certain rights where you can speak and have your point of view published within the party, and above all, it is STILL POSSIBLE TO REFORM THE PARTY to revolutionary Marxism, than your actions are the actions of loyal members. Even though you have your separate caucus and line you keep your arguments within the party.

But when you reach the point where reform is no longer possible, or when you are expelled as the Left Opposition was, then it is foolish to merely try to win over PARTY LEADERS. Above all as an outside faction you must GO TO THE CLASS AND TRY AND WIN NEW RECRUITS THERE, as well as work within the party if you are still trying to reform it and win recruits within. This dialectical relation the Cannon, Shachtman, A-born faction never understood in the days of the CLA, their actions in entering the S.P., and their actions today reveal this. We will deal with the latter two phases later. The fight between the weak left wing of the foundation conference in Chicago and the leadership is a part of this struggle. It grew as a sore and festered as the League grew.

PREJUDICE VS. REASON.

Another aspect of this question is the opposite. By that I mean how to judge humans in their environmental surroundings. Each type who comes to the revolutionary Marxian organization must be studied according to his background and used accordingly. In different parts of the country you recruit individuals, who if transplanted in other parts of the country would be detrimental rather than a help, until they, themselves overcome their sectional shortcomings. A leadership must take this into account. Not so with Cannon. On page 92 of his book he speaks of a New York comrade with corduroy pants, a mustache and long hair--and from Greenwich Village. He condemns this comrade forthright and says, he knows that he was no good. This comrade later joined Oehler and therefore that proves the Group of Basky, Stern and Oehler was no good. This is confused reasoning. Every faction in New York and in New England has such types. There are the types of that area. Often these comrades know more about revolutionary Marxism than their cousins in other parts of the country. New York especially has as many European "personalities" as it has American. Don't let these details confuse you. Cannon is correct, in one secondary aspect. That these comrades are not the best to go West and South and take over trade union work, etc. But every comrade has his place and every comrade may or can be adjusted to his environmental secondary aspects. In any faction, types who are in their local environment, may be the best theoretical comrades regardless of their individual peculiarities.

Every developing youth passes through that stage of peculiar habits and dress. On the basis of what Cannon says at one time or the other every college boy or girl should be condemned for their freakish dress. The joke is on Cannon, every faction had these types; most of them have grown conservative in taste after a few years. Cannon's argument, that because this fellow with corduroy pants joined Oehler, therefore, the Oehler group is no good, is one kind of silly argument and type of prejudice presented in his "History" of Trotskyism. We shall give more of Cannon's arguments against us that are as bad, if not worst than this one.

TOWARD MASS WORK

"On January 29, 1933 there was held at Gillespie, Illinois a conference of the Progressive Miners Union and other independent labor organizations to consider the question of a new federation." I attended the conference by invitation from a group of Progressive miners, and spoke there. This was the first time in nearly five years that I had been able to get out of New York. It was also the first time that any representative of the American Left Opposition had a chance to speak to workers as such outside the small circle of intellectual radicals. (p.105)

I think this is as good a point as any to speak of the excellent work carried on by our Left Opposition comrades in the coal fields and nearby industrial cities of this area. It seems like Cannon can only remember what he personally participates in; or is there a reason behind this failure to present the work toward the masses in this area for a period of years?

Cannon was invited to speak here because the Communist League had the proper influence. We had the proper influence because we had carried on work for several years in this whole area. I have already told you that the left opposition to the Cannon, Schachtman program already developed at the first national conference in Chicago. This continued to grow and Chicago was a base of its activity with the coal fields so near. When I was finally permitted to leave the party I settled in Chicago and worked with the Chicago unit. It had a healthy reaction and was the main force that prodded the top committee of the league for many burning problems of the day and for action in the class struggle besides being a faction of the party (CP). It was not the only unit that did this. Others did too; but the Illinois area translated into action their written arguments.

While the line of Cannon was to act as a faction in the Stalinist unemployed Leagues we were already building independent unemployed leagues in this area. We were doing in the Illinois area what the Muste group was doing in Ohio. In addition we had a small but excellent faction in the Progressive miners and were working among the coal miners both in trade union and unemployed work.

After several years of Jimmy Higgins' work on the part of all these comrades we finally reached the point where the Chicago and St. Louis units, together with our comrades in the coal fields coordinated their work so that they could support Wheeler as a full time organizer in this area. The Militant sympathizer club in Chicago really furnished most of the money for this activity. There were many comrades who made this possible; some are unable to be mentioned. But we can name a few. Without the work of the comrades of the two units, the Militant Club and Fraser, Angelo, Allard, Thompson and Watt and many others, this would not be possible.

Cannon says, "On May 1 and 2, 1933 the great Mooney Conference was held in Chicago, initiated by the Stalinists, but with many trade unions participating. We sent a delegation to this conference and I had the opportunity to speak to several thousand people." (p.114)

Do you think the Stalinists would have left Cannon alone in Gil-

lespie Jan. 29th, and in Chicago May 1, if the Stalinists' hands were not tied by genuine workers who supported us? Of course not.

What Cannon fails to reveal is the fact that from St. Louis to Chicago and throughout the coal fields the Communist League had its own independent position in the miners union and the unemployment work. In large independent unemployed locals scattered throughout the coal fields and in Chicago, etc., the Communist League had ideological leadership. Likewise we had ideological leadership above the Stalinists and Socialists in the Illinois coal fields. Many times a Left bloc in the coal fields among others would include ~~and~~ Left Opposition forces. I covered those towns week in and week out with other League comrades who would sacrifice time, money, and their autos to make this possible. We often exchanged delegates with the Ohio unemployment movement dominated by the Muste forces. They liked our boys and we liked theirs when we came in contact with each other.

This work toward the masses was the foundation upon which the two meetings Cannon speaks of were held. Cannon was called into ride the crest of the wave of our correct elementary class struggle work that gave us roots and that enabled several other comrades and myself to speak regularly, often daily to large meetings of unemployed workers or Progressive miners. Cannon speaks as though his speeches were the first for any league members.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not speaking personally for the comrades of this area or myself. We have no malice or petty reasons to bring out these facts. The reason I speak of this is because, 1.- as an independent revolutionary Marxian organization (the CLA) under our own banner was carrying on work toward the masses far ahead of what was done in New York under the stifling influence of the top committee of Cannon and Schachtman. 2.- This independent successful work toward the masses was carried on long before the steps toward fusion with Muste were taken. 3.- This activity was carried on long before Cannon and Schachtman beat the members interline and expelled those who would not agree to liquidate into the Socialist Party. 4.- This activity of the Chicago, St. Louis, and Illinois comrades was a mile-post in ground work to convince Muste and his able followers that the CLA was a worthwhile organization. Muste understood that if Cannon could speak on a May Day Money Conference controlled by the Stalinists then the CLA comrades in this area must have considerable influence.

There is a fifth reason. You will notice if you recheck Cannon's "History" that he has organized his sequence and structure in such a fashion that we were all isolated and sectarian until the Minneapolis strike, and at this time onward Oehler's usefulness was nil, and at this time we were taking steps to negotiate with Muste and Trotsky put forth his French Turn liquidation plank. In other words, Cannon would have us believe with the elimination of the Basky, Stamm, Oehler faction, with mergers and liquidation into the SP et al--from then on we turned toward the masses. This chronology of events given by Cannon is false. Other examples can be given from other cities, where our comrades had also taken a goodly turn toward the masses. This was well underway in the same period I have been discussing. This work was accomplished over the heads of the top committee.

Before the April Conference Cannon speaks of there were other conferences. Let us quote from a letter dealing with this:

Springfield, ILL.
March 4, 1933

J.P. Cannon
National Executive Committee

Comrade Cannon:

I sent you yesterday special delivery the article for the Militant on the conference. This will give you a general impression of the conference. I will now deal with the other phase of the conference.

The forces represented at the conference were scattered and of none too great an importance outside of the PMA delegates which constituted the bulk and backbone.

The politician forces represented gave Stalinism the overwhelming majority as an organized force; but the left opposition with no delegates and only fraternal delegates and close sympathizers of the organization as delegates were able to put through their policy and to be the main driving force and revolving point of the conference. The Mustites were few in number but very active. The Socialists were strong in number but unorganized with the right wing socialists supporting opportunist proposals and the left socialist in the main supporting the Left Opposition. The new federationists and strictly trade unionists were the second largest organized force of the conference but they lacked floor leaders and clear policy."

One thing can be said and must be understood. That if I had walked into town at the last day we would have been handicapped and in fact maybe no factor of importance at the conference. The fact that I had been in the Gillespie area for over a week prior to the conference and spoke at three meetings as a Left Oppositionist and had made contacts, and some new contacts is one reason why we were able to drive through our policy."

signed,

Hugo Oehler

FACTION FIGHTS AND FACTION FIGHTS

In Cannon's history of Trotskyism he often minimized here and there and then on the other hand, often enlarges other events, as we have already revealed. Here is another such example. Cannon ignores almost completely in his book the fact that in the whole life of the League from late 1928 until the unification with the Muste forces we only had one conference, a couple of plenums and our liquidation convention when we organized the Workers Party. This bureaucratic control from the top was fought constantly by the Illinois area and others but we could not obtain a majority, except pressure to force through a Plenum.

The first Plenum was held, not mainly because we had a rotten factional fight in New York between Cannon and Shactman. However Cannon writes like a "democrat" and accuses us of bureaucracy. He says, "The

Oehler group, for example, was no sooner constituted as an independent organization than the people who had been lured by his appeals against the terrible bureaucracy of the Trotskyist got a rude shock. They encountered the most rigid and despotic caricature of bureaucracy." (P. 221) Nothing is farther from the truth, Cannon is accusing us of what he is guilty of.

The RWL went through the Cannon-Schactman bureaucracy and therefore wrote the most far reaching and best constitution yet to be written in the United States. It gives the membership more democratic control than any other revolutionary organization we know of, based upon Democratic Centralism. Cannon may reply, "But in life you acted bureaucratic." We answer that this is not so. Under democratic centralism we allowed all opposition and differences within the League, except when majority decisions are reached and if these former minorities continue to take this minority position to the class against our official position. Cannon or no one else can find an action against comrades in our organization to the contrary. For example, Eiffel always had principle differences with the majority but only when he took these differences to the class did we by mutual consent part company, yet as friends.

But let us get back to the first plenum of the League and its factional fight. It is a contrast to what I have just said and the way the RWL conducts its activity.

The Plenum was held before I was sent to the Coal fields that I just mentioned. The after effects of the Plenum faction fight was still felt in our work in Illinois in spite of our success. I still called it the Cannon-Schactman leadership even though there were two factions and I was with the Cannon faction. This is because no move was made from the national office without Shachman's O.K. His faction was able to stalemate every move of the Cannon faction and stifled the work.

When we heard of the proposed Plenum in Chicago we were all for it because we could take up neglected issues. The left wing comrades were able to have placed on the agenda such questions as the labor party, (which we wanted to vote down, as it stood as an open question) the Negro question, the trade union question, American Imperialism and others. We succeeded in getting these points on the agenda--at the end. At first I thought that this was a victory; but as the Plenum dragged on talking about factional nothingness we never got to these points at this Plenum.

I naturally had to take a position on the factional fight even though my points were not reached. I voted with Cannon and his faction against Shactman and others and identified myself with Cannon until the left wing organized its own faction a few years later.

The following letter in part just before the Plenum sent by me to the top committee will throw light upon the situation. For each event that I deal with I will give quotations from letters, documents etc., of that period to show that I am not making a reevaluation of the event, after the event in retrospect.

Chicago, Ill.
April 11 1932

National Executive Committee
Communist League of America

Comrade (Secretary):

I have your minutes of the 4th and the statement of Cannon and Shachtman on the calling of a Plenum.

The discussion seems to revolve around the point, should we call a plenum first and then start discussion, or proceed with the discussion to end with a conference. The question has already been settled in a negative way. We already have discussion here, and I am positive the same is true in New York. The discussion started with the minutes and statements of the youth committee sent out first."

The documents already issued, to my opinion settle the Carter issue, but they do not lay down the present difference between the comrades of the national committee. The documents only speak of past differences. Once the present differences are presented, POLITICAL differences, than an understanding of the past differences will through light upon the political arguments, that is all.

If more documents are issued, similar to the one by Carter, you will find it detrimental to the League. Therefore, I am of the opinion that before documents are issued for the members we should hold a plenum in order to collectively eliminate personal and secondary issues to be able to give the members political documents of differences. Therefore I vote for the calling of a Plenum.

Signed

Hugo Oehler

The Plenum fight was on a low level. The real political documents to be taken were never reached. It revealed an internal sickness from isolation and internal existence suffered by small organizations.

I now quote from another letter one year later to show what I mean:

Gillespie, Ill.
March 30, 1933

Dear Comrade Cannon:

Just got back from Taylorville and find your letter and the latest minutes. The kind of work one carries on here in the coal fields moves one so far from the stifling New York factional situation, that it has the effect, not of making peace but of driving harder toward our goal to solve the internal situation in order that the Left Opposition can take its rightful place in the American Labor Movement. It makes a person "boil" when he realized the valuable energy "wasted" over "trifles" with the mutual aid factions and disintegrating tendencies when the League should be driving out into class activity.

For this reason as well as others I am of the opinion that comrade

Trotsky's letter of March the 7th, and comrade (Secretary's) agreement should be given the most careful attention. I think comrade Trotsky, not only leans backward in his position in regard to the internal US situation of the League, but leaves the situation hanging where you can have an endless argument, with our pedantic friends.

If we follow comrade Trotsky's opinion it would mean, not that we have already given them proper minority posts and activity, but give them the majority

Comradely,

Hugo Oehler

Again you may ask, why do I report this Plenum which fails to take up the fundamental issues confronting the class and only takes up secondary issues? I want you to have an accurate report of this phase which Cannon completely ignores so you can compare it to plenums of the Workers' Party which Cannon does deal with. When we present our facts of these future plenums and compare it with this you will understand how not to write "history."

Yes, there are factional fights and factional fights, just like there are wars and wars (imperialist and revolutionary wars), just like there are revolutions (political revolutions and social revolutions). Cannon deals with the Plenums and factional fights in the Workers' Party and labels them as fights by Trotskyism against sectarianism; and ignores the factional low points of the CLA. Until the Left Wing organized just before unification with Muste there were no fundamental and principle factional fights in the CLA. We will show how Cannon, in the Workers' Party, has turned inside out the real relation of forces as to Marxism and principles. It is a case of Cannon calling our "sectarian" in order to cover up his own role of opportunism.

Hitler in Power and the League

One thing will stand out as a mountain in history even though mistakes were made in making the new turn, and that is the analysis and predictions of the Left Opposition in relation to Germany.

Trotsky, not only saw what was taking place in Spain in its revolutionary development but also presented a clear out analysis and what was to be done for Germany. The crimes of Stalinism in this situation will go down as one of the blackest pages of working class history. Our predictions were correct, in the negative, and when one "wins" in the negative it takes the most level headed to keep an even keel.

Confusion ran wild in the revolutionary labor movement and the Left Opposition was no exception to this. Isolation crowding upon us time pressing us to the utmost caused many to lose their political perspective. Unfortunately Trotsky was one of these. To most comrades he was God and his writings the Bible. They followed him blindly and anyone who questioned him was a heretic. Trotsky correctly called for a new international, the Fourth International and made it clear that the C.I. could no longer be reformed. This brought us to a sharp turn. We had to move fast because we knew that with the Hitler victory war was around the corner.

I do not think as some comrades do that we should have declared

the C.I. dead long before, say with the Chinese revolution. I think that in such a complicated international organization with many sections in different countries you try every avenue possible to reform it and gain its revolutionary elements from being recruited before the Stalinist leadership corrupts it. But I do think, now and in the past as a member of the Left Opposition, that we were too much of a fetish about the party. As I said before, even as a faction, OUTSIDE, but a faction we should have worked on two fronts, that is not only to win party members and work as a faction but above all to go direct to the class as we did in the coal fields, in unemployment, etc.

But from our standpoint the fatal error of Trotsky was what is now labeled the "French Turn" the position of liquidating the independent organizations into the Socialist Parties through out the world. The French comrades carried through first and that is where it got its name. This was Trotsky's answer to the German defeat. He wanted to get a party quick and was willing to try a maneuver, as he did on more than one occasion in Russia when he was organizing the Left Opposition, steps that cost him organizational annihilation. By that we mean his party fetishisms, or loyalty, which meant to Stalinism, not some abstract Marxian organization. His failure to organize and drive the fight within Russia and within the Communist International before they completely isolated him.

This German defeat took place after the events I spoke of when I was assigned to Illinois. By this time, when we were in the middle of the French Turn I had been assigned to work in New York, the Hotel Strike, the Minneapolis strike, and many other activities. I was used as a sort of trouble shooter to organize our forces in the situations where we had big class actions, big for the Left Opposition. But while I was out in the field I kept one eye on theoretical material. I would not be caught like I was in District ten when the Lovestonites took over, nor isolated like in Gastonia. By that I mean that I like field work but I always want to keep a pipeline to the top so I am sure I know what is going on. The first two times I did not have this; but in the above situation I did. I not only had the top committee material but capable comrades in New York who worked with me in a loose left force that supplemented this material.

With this background of events I think Cannon's statement about me is cast in a different light. He says on page 155, "That was Hugo Oehler who was a very capable mass worker and trade unionist. His work in Minneapolis was the last bit of good he ever done for us. Soon afterwards he caught the sectarian sickness. But up to then Oehler was alright, and he contributed something to the strike." What Cannon is really saying, when we translate his subjective position into political language, is this. While I was with the Cannon faction and my activity was associated with his faction I was alright; but with the French turn and many other important differences which came to a head at the same time we parted company and organized a faction against his. Cannon labels this left wing as sectarian. He has no other choice. Let us put it this way. If Cannon claims the new turn he followed was Marxian, and it was clear that we opposed him from the left than he had to label us sectarian in order to keep the label of Marxism for himself. If he did not do this, and since we had principled differences, and if it was admitted that our position was Marxian, that it would obviously follow

that Cannon's position, being to the right was either centrist or possibly reformist. We labeled them Centrist and do the same today. We label the Cannon faction as left centrist on most of their deviations. There are many centrist groups and factions to the right of Cannon who cannot be called reformist in theory.

Let us deal with a small point, and a subjective point, because even as such it will throw light upon events to follow. You will remember that while in Minneapolis Cannon and Schachtman were arrested and obtained nation wide publicity. Cannon says, "I don't know how they found out that we were there, as we were not very conspicuous in public. But Schachtman was wearing a great big ten-gallon cowboy hat--where he got it, or why in God's name he wore it, I never knew--and that made him conspicuous." (p.162) What kind of double talk is that? "We were not very conspicuous in public." . . . but Max was very "conspicuous." Cannon is partly correct but he should not blame everything on Max. I told Max to get rid of his hat and so did others in Minneapolis. But more important than this was the fact that when Jim and Max got to town they got a room in one downtown small hotel together and proceeded to hold meetings with important people of the strike and other League functionaries. When I came to town, with the help of local comrades I got a room not far from strike headquarters in a good rooming house. I checked several places before I found the place which met my requirements. After a couple of days at this hotel and when I met with the comrades I not only noticed that their room was littered with League and strike material which any clean-up maid could see each day; but I noticed the same characters hanging around in the lobby and across the street, fellows who wore policemen's shoes, if you know what I mean. I pointed this out to Jim and Max, so did Vincent and others. But they did not move or do anything to correct this. On this basis they could be followed here and there and be picked up when wanted. This is not the first time that they were criticized for this. I criticized this action in Chicago on my way back and later in New York. It looked as though Jim and Max wanted real proof that the Left Opposition had something to do with the strike. They were not satisfied with merely circumstantial evidence on the part of the capitalist state, the labor fakers like Tobin and others. These actions later helped Tobin in his drive against the Teamsters, and also helped the prosecution in the trial of the 18 Trotskyites.

Keep in mind the dates of these League events and disputes and you will understand how everything seemed to culminate at once. In the spring of '34 we started the first steps toward negotiations with the Muste Group. The Minneapolis strike referred to above started July 16 and lasted a month and a half. The French Turn was advanced by Trotsky about the same time. In addition we had many other "negotiation" irons in the fire. Here are a few quotations from a letter to Al Glotzer and others which will tell you what I mean:

New York
June 4, 1934

Dear Comrade Al:

You know we have Jim at the SP convention in Detroit to see if we can strengthen our relations with the Revolutionary Policy Committee group of the SP and to further their fight against the right wing. This

in itself is alright but by itself falls short unless other steps are taken at the same time. Because our negotiations with the AWP are in a critical stage the NEC is endeavoring to score success with the RPC in the SP. (note: Sulasky, Budenz, and other right wingers were trying to stop the negotiations)

At the May 27th meeting of the NEC where this came up I was forced to enter the following statement to make my position clear.

"I agree with the policy on the SP convention and think the deficiency in our program lies in the failure of the committee to base the negotiations with the ~~Citlow~~ group, the United Workers Party, the American Workers Party and now the Revolutionary Policy Committee, upon a thesis which defines our position on the question of organization of a new party in America, and at the same time taking these questions up with the whole membership through internal discussion.

"We have had sufficient time to negotiate with several groups on the question of a new party but have failed to find time in six months to issue the said thesis and have a membership agreement on it. The most urgent task confronting the committee is the issuing of the said thesis and to start a preconvention discussion in the branches within two weeks on this question."

They claim the thesis will be ready next week. That has been a promise since Jan."

Comradely,

Hugo

For a half year they promised this document, from January to June--but we never received it in time nor did the membership have any proper convention--except the liquidation convention where they were confronted with an accomplished fact, the fusion with the Muste force.

In his history Cannon tries to pass off this as opposition to negotiations and fusion. I am always for fusion--if it is on a Marxian program, if the membership is democratically informed and if the proper internal and class steps are taken with Fusion--toward an independent revolutionary Marxian Party. But the top committee neglected all steps except FUSION steps. And we can truthfully say--that by the fall, when we learned of Trotsky's "French Turn" we realized, but could not prove that all these negotiations were for Cannon and others to clear the road and take all possible into the Socialist Party. Our theoretical premises proved 100% accurate factually later.

Here is another letter which I will quote from to add more evidence to what I have just said. This letter was addressed to the Left Wing comrades in all parts of the country and was one of the steps toward organizing the left wing caucus:

New York

Sept. 17, 1934

Dear Comrades:

New developments in regard to the AWP, that was announced in the Militant before the branches had adequate information shows how panic stricken our majority is. This new development speeds up the tempo and adds new dangers:

1- It does not give the branches sufficient time to discuss this

because the NEC will have to present organizational proposals for unity to our members before our convention .

2-There is danger that the NEC majority will try to skip over such issues as the Negro question, Latin America, etc., because we don't have time. (Excuse) We must settle these issues so we enter the new party united on them.....

3-The NEC majority is again reviving the talk that it may be necessary to compromise and to go into the new party without a Marxian program. Watch this very close.

New York is discussing the French turn.....

Our position regarding the French turn is for the independence of the Communist League and the SENDING OF A FACTION IN THE SP. (present emphasis). The result in France is the following. A split. Part went into the SP.

Fraternally yours,
Hugo

Here is another letter I quote from. It reveals how close all these events and issues were tied up and why Cannon turned sour on me "after" the Minneapolis strike. I had no personal arguments then or now with Cannon and Shactman--it was political and principled then and now.

New York

Sept 20, 1934

Dear Comrades:

I just arrived several days ago in New York after my stay in Minneapolis and another trip through the coal fields and find the convention proceedings lagging. Important material that should be in the hands of the membership has not been sent out. . . . therefore I am enclosing a copy of the material for you.

Since January we have been carrying on a fight on this question. A new danger is developing. Although the thesis says we will only merge into a Marxian Party (the Left Wing forced this into the thesis) there is still danger that the NEC will ask you to unite with the AWP on a non Marxian program.

I may mention, you will be asked to vote on the French turn soon.

Comradely,
Hugo

A month later another letter was sent to the left wing caucus and among many things it said the following:

New York
Oct. 6, 1935

Dear Comrades:

Yesterday the NEC of 5 held a meeting with the NEC of 5 of the AWP. We took up the fundamentals for a programmatic declaration of the new party and came to a verbal agreement on what we call a minimum Marxian program (as per section 28 of the new party thesis). It means that the

AWP have revised their position again. If the programmatic declaration of the new party can contain the Marxian fundamentals we should unite. This looks like a good possibility now.

This proved that those of the organization from the NEC on down who were willing to form a new party with the AWP on a program that was non-Marxian were wrong. That our pressure to unite on a Marxian program--or no unity was correct and that more pressure is needed to see that this verbal point is carried out. Our fight for over 9 months on this point is vindicated.

As we have said before, just because we have agreement on a program does not make all the members Marxists. The fight will just begin. Don't have any illusions... All indications are that we will get a minimum Marxian declaration of principles, and this ARMS THE MARXISTS AGAINST THE CENTRISTS in the new party, either those who come through unifications or the new recruits.

By the way, it was Glotzer's vote which was decisive in postponing the convention. Aborn, Shactman and Oehler voted against postponement.

Goldman wants us to forget the AWP and join the SP. However, the majority of the NEC say if the present move to unite with the AWP fails our next step is entry into the SP. Our left wing position leads in the other direction. We are for a faction in the SP, send in capable comrades, but we excluded the NEC majority position.

Conradely,

Hugo

11-1-49

(TO BE CONTINUED)

ENGELS ON THE UNITED STATES

But this I consider certain: the purely bourgeois basis, with no pre-bourgeois swindle behind it, the corresponding energy of the development, which manifests itself even in the made exaggeration of the present protective tariff system, will one day bring about a change which will astound the whole world. Once the Americans get started it will be with an energy and violence compared with which we in Europe shall be mere children.

From letter of
March 30, 1892